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The Case of the Charleston Five

Blacks, Labor, and Southern Politics

BY CHRIS KROMM

Take a short stroll circling the waterfront off of Battery Park, and it's hard to tell whether the Old South or a new, updated version is winning out in Charleston. In and around the park stand the genteel mansions, a slouching white gazebo, and the occasional hoop-skirted tour guide buttering up a gaggle of tourists in search of Old South charm. These nostalgic flourishes reflect a deeper tone in the port city, run by a good-ol'-boy network the way one might expect in a state that keeps the very senior Senator Strom Thurmond propped up in Congress, and whose fondness for the old ways kept the Confederate battle flag flying above the state capitol until last year.

But Charleston is also the crown jewel of a state desperately wanting to be seen as cosmopolitan and "world class". Refocus your eyes further down the coastline, and faintly visible are the massive cranes, vessels and kindred machinery that comprise South Carolina's portal to its global future: the Charleston shipyards.

The old ways are cute, but integration in the global economy pays the bills. Harboring vessels from nine of the world's ten biggest shipping lines, Charleston is the fourth-busiest container port in the country. And the port's role in making South Carolina a "global player" is only expected to rise as international auto companies like BMW funnel their goods through Charleston to expand operations on the other side of the state.

So for the state's boosters stakes were high when, in January of 2000, 150 members of the International Longshoreman Association, Local 1422, held a militant picket to protest the use of nonunion labor by a small, renegade shipping line on the Charleston docks. The demonstration soon escalated into a battle between the authorities and the workers, five of whom now face trial for felony rioting charges in what has become one of the most closely-watched Southern labor battles in over a decade, and which speaks volumes about the economic and political struggles at the heart of the South today.

In South Carolina, the old south culture occasionally comes into conflict with the excited Newer South visions of the boosters. There was the time in the mid-1990s, for example, when one German auto-maker, courted by state leaders to expand its operations to South Carolina, took note of the state's flag controversy and ultimately shunned what it labeled "the cracker capital of the world."

But usually the minds of the Southern elite, both traditional and modern, meld on a common program: pro-corporate economics, and racially coded politics, the only question for debate being the appropriate proportion of the two.

Some two hours inland from the coast, about 5,000 spirited demonstrators massed on the state capitol in Columbia July 9 to protest what they saw as the latest manifestation of this unholy alliance in the case of the Charleston Five. For over 200 years, the Charleston docks have been run by generations of African-American labor - and four of the five facing charges are black - making the ILA crackdown a

(**Charleston** *continued on page 5*)

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Our Little Secrets

John Lee Hooker, 1917-2001

From our friend David Vest, blues piano player with the Cannonballs and an exemplary Southern poet:

It was perhaps the shortest interview I would ever conduct. We were backstage down under the viaduct in Birmingham at a club called the Pussycat A-Go-Go. I couldn't believe I was talking to John Lee Hooker, and I'm afraid it showed.

By this time I had already met and performed with a number of celebrities. I had been in a dressing room with Roy Orbison, shook Carter Stanley's hand, and discussed Dr. Strangelove with Slim Pickens. Mere fame would no longer have impressed me. People had stopped seeming more real to me simply because I had seen them on television or in films.

But this was different. This was as close as I had ever been to the source of all the music I loved most. John Lee Hooker's records sounded older than time, blacker than coal dust, rawer than an open wound, and deeper than anything they were teaching me in college.

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I looked at him standing there, dressed in a dark suit, arms folded, leaning against a table, and thought about the cover of the first Hooker album I'd ever seen, the one called I'm John Lee Hooker, with the picture of an old stove and a coal bucket on the front.

I thought about the radio station in Huntsville that used to give me all his records because they were considered too "primitive" for airplay. (They wouldn't play Gene Vincent either.)

I recalled a night in the Florida Panhandle, during a jam session with members of the Dorsey Orchestra (Lee Castle's edition), when a sax man asked me what I wanted to play next. "Do you know anything by John Lee Hooker?" I asked, as innocent as you can still be at 17. "We don't play hillbilly music, kid", came the reply.

It seemed for years that I couldn't get anyone else I knew interested in John Lee's music. When I first started playing in bands, the guitar players didn't like his records because there was nothing on them they could imitate. They could learn to sound just like a Jimmy Reed or a Bo Diddley record, but they couldn't get anywhere near John Lee's sound.

I think that's still true today. I can go to any jam session and find no shortage of players (in fact there are far too many of them) all too eager to present a passable imitation of Stevie Ray Vaughan, Albert Collins, Buddy Guy, or Eric Clapton. Occasionally I run across a Mark Knopfler or even a Roger McGuinn clone. But I never hear anybody try to sound like John Lee.

I suppose guitar players have sense enough to know that his music is unplayable by anyone but him. But it isn't just his guitar playing. I have often wondered why sax players don't try to play the lines he sings. A tenor player who could play what John Lee sings on a late masterpiece called "Highway 13" would get hired on the spot in my band.

Anyway, there he was, waiting for my question, so I told him some of this in a long-winded nervous way and concluded by informing him that I had listened to a lot of blues and as far as I could tell, he was The Man.

"That's right," he said.

Flanders v. Flanders

In the Sunday NY Times from June 24, we found "2001 In the Shadow of AIDS, a World of Other Problems" by Stephanie Flanders, who worked in Clintontime as special assistant to Treasury Secretary Larry Summers.

Flanders enlisted unnamed "experts" and "observers" to argue that it's a waste of resources to try to cure Africans of AIDS when the money would be better spent attacking malaria, or TB, or hookworm. One "expert" Flanders invoked by name was Dr. Lant Pritchett, a former economist at the World Bank who teaches development economics at Harvard. His opening quote: "It's not fair, if treatments exist, not to give [AIDS treatments] to all these people who are dying. But it's also not fair that more than a third of children in Africa are malnourished. It's not fair that maybe 140 babies in every 1,000 will die before the age of 1, and more than a third will never learn to read. All of it is unfair. Unfairness is not the test for action."

Yes, this is the same Pritchett who actually wrote the infamous memo Larry Summers put his signature to when he was president of the World Bank. Pritchett's memo argued it was okay to send toxic industries to the third world because life expectancy rates dictated the workers would die before they contracted cancer.

The thrust of Flanders' piece was to the general effect that it's not worth throwing money at the AIDS-infected in Africa. The money will be stolen or wasted or misspent or would be better used for some other purpose.

It's ever thus when talking about the poor parts of the world. Either/Or, and mostly Neither/Nor. We may help you with AIDS, or we may help you with TB. But maybe it would be best to let Nature take its course.

The United Nations General Assembly finally passed its first Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS and it wasn't just a set of mandates for spending big dollars on AIDS at the expense of every other health concern. Member states agreed that AIDS is more than just a medical issue; it's political, having to do with human rights, gender equality, sexual education and economics, and they called for work on each of those fronts.

One comment on Stephanie Flanders'

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Though lethal at high concentrations, arsenic at much lower levels was reckoned earlier in the century have therapeutic properties.

piece came from her sister Laura, who used to produce that great radio show CounterSpin and who has been doing radio commentary for Working Assets' stations and website: "In an article June 24", Laura wrote, "this writer's own sister greeted summiteers with a piece …in which doomsayers warned that the spotlight on AIDS 'which grabs people emotionally', 'diverts energy attention from broader development efforts'. Powerful media love to say that misguided 'do-gooders' are actually doers of wrong. You hear it about labor rights activists whose campaigns lead to the closing of factories; and feminists — their efforts have only doubled women's load. In fact, the struggle around AIDS has always been about how power and prejudice affect people's health, and by extension, a society's strength."

Here at CounterPunch we love and esteem both Stephanie and Laura, not least because they are nieces of coeditor Alexander C. But we're with Laura on this one.

PROJECT REALLY CENSORED

On Memorial Day CounterPunch coeditor Jeffrey St Clair accompanied a group of environmentalists and Navajo tribal leaders on a jet boat across the stagnating cobalt waters of Lake Powell to Rainbow Bridge, the world's largest natural arch and a sacred site to Navajo, Ute and pueblo Indians. The waters of the reservoir now lap underneath the great arch, despite protests from Navajo spiritual leaders that this was a grotesque defilement of one of their most important ceremonial areas. Also on board Brenda Nowell, an excellent reporter for Indian Country Today.

During the two hour trip from Wahweap Marina, near Page, Arizona, up to Forbidding Canyon and finally the bridge itself, Brenda told us of her experience covering the Zapatista march from Chiapas to Mexico City, an unnerving journey under the constant eye of the Mexican military. But she said that her most unsettling experience was working as a reporter for the Farmington Daily Times, a racist paper in one of America's most racist cities, Farmington, New Mexico, under the shadow of Shiprock, that 1,500 tall eroded volcanic plug rising like a man-of-war on the Colorado plateau, near the border of the Navajo Reservation. Here's Brenda's story.

Farmington was a nightmare at the time. When things happen to you that way, you can only take them personally. But of course it wasn't personal, just part of the racism in that very sick town. I was living in Shiprock and covering the Navajo Nation for the Daily Times, when Navajo teenagers were beaten with baseball bats by white teenagers while stopped at a convenience store. I interviewed the teens and researched it carefully. Instead of running my story, the Daily Times had another reporter write a hatchet article on the Navajo teens, making the victims appear responsible for their own beating. Editors knew the article wasn't the truth. I resigned and Marley Shebala wrote a headline article about the 'resignation over racism' that ran in the Gallup Independent.

There was a U.S. Civil Rights probe at the time, based out of Los Angeles, and I submitted a report on the incidents at the newspaper. There was also constant racial slurs about Indians from the staff during editorial meetings. During the U.S. Civil Rights hearings that year, one white man said he was stopped for traffic violations over 20 times by Farmington police after reporting a police officer for beating an Indian man. Rodney Barker, author of "The Broken Circle," came to the area and talked about the series of torture-murders of Navajos by whites in Farmington in the 1970s. One of the judge's son was charged in one of the hate crime beatings of Indians. Farmington police were also added to the Civil Rights Commission's probe. The beatings, murders and disappearances have continued since then in the Farmington area.

The Daily Times was sold, I believe, later and now has new owners. I try to forget the reporters and as much as possible about the Daily Times. The only good thing about working at the Farmington Daily Times was leaving it. It was horrible with the kind of racism I saw in the Ku Klux Klan-infested South where I grew up.

The racism in Farmington is like fungus, it grows well in darkness.

ARSENIC: THE GOOD NEWS

One last-minute Clinton booby-trap was the issuing of a plan in January to cut the maximum amount of arsenic allowed in drinking water from the current 50 parts per billion (ppb) to 10 ppb. As has been widely noted, for almost the whole of Clintontime, the White House took zero interest in arsenic. The EPA had spent some 20 years considering arsenic levels in drinking water. Bush's EPA is now desperately saying that it will sharply reduce the amount of arsenic permitted in drinking water, but it's too late. The booby-trap has been sprung. Here we have Erik Olson, an NRDC lawyer, hollering that "The Bush EPA's suspension of the arsenic is a distressing, unscientific, and illegal threat to the health of millions of Americans. There is no excuse for delaying or weakening the standard just finalized in January of this year." Six Senate Democrats including HRC have signed on as amicus supporters of the NRDC's suit.

Has anyone in the mostly western areas where natural levels of arsenic are found in water ever suffered ailments in consequence? We've never seen any such claims. Though lethal at high concentrations, arsenic at much lower levels was reckoned earlier in the century have therapeutic properties. We quote from the eleventh edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica: "Internally it is useful in certain forms of dyspepsia… It is the routine treatment for pernicious anaemia and Hodgkin's disease, though here again the drug may be of no avail. For the neuralgia and anaemia following malaria, for rheumatoid arthritis, for chorea and also asthma and hay fever, it is constantly prescribed with excellent results. Certain skin diseases such as psoriasis, pemphigus and occasionally chronic eczema, are much benefited by its use, though occasionally a too prolonged course will produce the very lesion for which under other circumstances it is a cure."

This learned disquisition concludes with the news that "occasionally, as among the Styrians, individuals acquire the habit of arsenic-eating, which is said to increase their weight, strength and appetite, and clears their complexion." Styria is a province in eastern Austria.

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(**OLS** *continued from page 3)*

This notwithstanding, the Britannica did not scant the deadly nature of arsenic, and neither do we. Let no CounterPuncher take arsenic to cure any complaint.

Norton's Secret Past

"At Merritt Hutton High School, she was a studious, socially concerned, and politically aware student, campaigning in 1972 for presidential candidate George McGovern." And who are we talking about here? None other than Secretary of the Interior, Gale Norton, disciple of James Watt and a woman, if we are to believe frantic fundraising letters from the big green groups, who snacks on endangered species and would okay an oil well next to Old Faithful. McGovern's campaign manager in that ill-fated '72 campaign was Gary Hart, another Coloradan, just like young Norton. Disclosure of Norton's McGovernite past comes courtesy of the recent February-March edition of People, Land and Water.

Don't Sue Henry!

Hitchens writes in Harper's, and in his new book The Trial of Henry Kissinger, that Kissinger is a war criminal. Kissinger responds to a Detroit radio talk show host, Mitch Albom, that Hitchens had "denied the Holocaust ever took place". Does that mean that Kissinger accepts he's a war criminal? Now Hitchens tells the New York Post that he and his wife Carol are Jewish and that "Mr. Kissinger will be hearing from my attorney, who will tell him two things he already knows — what he said is false, malicious and defamatory, and if he says it again, we will proceed against him in court."

That's a mistake, surely. It makes Hitchens sound defensive. It also changes the subject from Kissinger's bloodstained rampages through the late twentieth century to what precisely Hitchens wrote about David Irving. The idea may be to get HK into a libel action and then see what can be dragged out of the monster's archives in the discovery process. But such a suit would cost a fortune, and even though CH is surely well paid by Vanity Fair for his monthly column, we doubt he wants to see $200,000 end up in a lawyer's back pocket (unless he has a Magic Christian or Magic Jew ready to finance the whole enterprise.) Better, surely, to make a joke about Kissinger's counter-slur and then refocus public attention on the desirability of putting HK on trial.

In the wake of Hitchens's two articles in Harper's on Kissinger's war crimes, magistrates in three countries — Chile, Argentina, and France — have summoned Kissinger to answer questions. Le Monde reported earlier this month that when French Judge Roger Le Loire had a summons served on Kissinger on May 31 at the Ritz Hotel in Paris, Kissinger fled Paris. The judge wanted to ask Kissinger about his knowledge of Operation Condor, the scheme evolved by Pinochet and other Latin American proconsuls of the American Empire to kill or "disappear" their opponents.

Bono and Heston

After last issue's sour words about U2's Bono (friend of Jeffrey Sachs and Jesse Helms), CounterPuncher and actress Olivia Blake sends us this amusing report on a recent U2 concert.

I agree, there IS something slightly annoying about self named rock star saviors, but they have money and money is power and if they need to hang out with the grimiest of the grimy men on the Hill in order to get people thinking about the third world then I say why not. However, sometimes the public isn't as up to date on politics as these leather wearing hip-gyrating (aging) rockers would assume.

For example while finishing up his set in Boston, Bono decided to walk off stage and leave 30 something thousand screaming fans staring at three huge screens at the rear of the stage as a 20 foot projection of Charlton Heston appeared and began saying things like "guns aren't bad, only bad people with guns are bad" or something gross along those lines...Now, (I'm sure to Bono's dismay) a huge majority of the drunk/stoned/what have you crowd CHEERED at the screens (not hearing what he was saying and not knowing who this old man was).

This was hilarious but somehow very sad....There was Bono shaking his fists and screaming "down with the NRA" and most people smiled and took his angry expression for artistic depth and enthusiasm.

Flying Death Traps

We found a nice old postcard in a junk store the other day. It featured a family aboard a PanAm Clipper, flying the Atlantic. Smiling couple lounging in vast armchairs; children stretched out; flight attendant plying them with sumptuous viands and goblets of choice wine. An atmosphere of graceful ease. Now, pony up many thousands of dollars and you can get a first class ticket on British Airways where the chair turns into a bunk and you can drink without cease the goblets of champagne handed you by the steward. But the norm this summer will be constriction of the limbs in motionless torment, hour after hour, scorned by the flight attendants, and poisoned by their loathsome snacks. These same attendants, ill-paid and overworked, naturally try to reduce their labors by switching on the seat belt sign and suspend all services at the first sign of turbulence.

It was on a BA flight from Sydney to London that healthy, 28-year old Emma Christofferson was killed last September by a blood clot incurred by protracted imprisonment in her tiny space. Her death has prompted many airlines around the world to advise "in-seat" exercises and walks around the plane whenever possible.

Protracted imprisonment in her tiny airline seat space killed healthy young Emma.

In other words the airlines are trying to head off liability suits. Imprison your passengers in their seats at extortionate rates, then when they get stricken with thrombosis tell them it's their fault for drinking too much or not doing their toe exercises. Can you imagine what a jumbo jet would look like if, in mid-Atlantic, everyone on board tried to take the obligatory stroll to save their lives?

All in all, what we have here is a neat parable about airline deregulation, (which happened in the Carter era, zealously promoted by liberals and conservatives alike). The doomsayers (lefties, Naderites etc) said service would go to hell, unprofitable but socially necessary routes abandoned, ticket costs soar and safety standards head through the floor. Though the computer-literate classes can get good rates through services like Priceline.com all this has mostly happened. It's getting riskier every day to fly, government regulators remain inert and all we get is a lousy leaflet tell-

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The show of force was prodigious..."you would think there was going to be a terrorist attack on the state of South Carolina."

(**Charleston** *continued from page 1)*

flashpoint for labor and freedom struggles.

The June rally was originally called by the South Carolina Progressive Network and local labor leaders, but soon attracted interest from activists nationwide. Many agreed with Bill Fletcher, Jr. - who has coordinated the national AFL-CIO's support for the workers - that "this is a very compelling case, one that brings together all the issues, a voice at work and the right to organize, issues of racial justice and issues of democracy."

Tracing the same route through Columbia's depressed downtown that was used by over 40,000 demonstrators against the Confederate flag in 1999, the mobilization was impressive not only for its size - as an older city native commented, "this has got to be the biggest labor rally in Columbia since the 1930s" - but also for the range of participants. Buses from North Carolina, Georgia and even New York delivered dozens of union locals who militantly declared their solidarity. The rally also attracted a sizable showing of Seattle-generation protesters (sans handkerchiefs) and, to the astonishment of locals, swarms of left grouplets which ringed the demonstration, newspapers held high. And in South Carolina, where labor rights are civil rights, the program featured leaders of the civil rights establishment, although these groups' numbers were small.

The larger political and economic dimension was not lost on the marchers. Numerous speakers noted that South Carolina's unionization rate - at three percent, the lowest in the country - is no accident. Anti-union zeal, begun in earnest during labor's textile campaigns of the 1930s and refined during the industrialization boom of the 1970s, has reached a new level. One piece of legislation pending before the state legislature would prohibit municipalities from setting a wage higher than the federal minimum - pre-emptively spiking local "living wage" efforts.

Another bill preventing longshore workers from serving on Charleston's Port Authority - targeted at ILA Local 1422 President Kenny Riley, who was unanimously asked to serve on the Authority in 1999 - has been revived from last year.

As Brett Bursey of the Progressive Network says, "They'd bring back slavery if they could."

It was in 1821 that a recently-freed slave in Charleston, Denmark Versey, having bought his way to freedom, began planning a slave revolt to free the rest. Versey had originally planned to spark rebellion throughout South Carolina through agitation, which would hopefully spread to undermine the South's entire plantation complex.

He grew impatient, and began organizing his own uprising. By the next year, nearly all the slaves in plantations surrounding Charleston were prepared to join the revolt. But a day before the insurrection, one slave betrayed Versey, who along with five associates were quickly tried and hanged.

The picket planned by ILA Local 1422 on January 20, 2000, was much less ambitious, but one wouldn't know it from the response of the South Carolina establishment. What exactly transpired on that chilly day is now a matter of legal dispute, and the legal team is staying silent as the Charleston 5 await the trial date, probably this fall.

What is known is that the trouble began in October of 1999, when the small-time Nordana shipping line notified Local 1422 that it was ending its 23-year relationship with the union and would be using nonunion labor to work its ships. A couple peaceful pickets followed, but eventually state officials decided it was time to show which side they're on.

On January 20 of the next year, as the Nordana ship Skodsborg rolled into harbor with 20 nonunion workers prepared to unload its cargo, 150 ILA picketers greeted the ship to express their dissatisfaction. Also on hand, to the surprise of the ILA workers, were 600 paramilitary-style officers representing law enforcement agencies from local cops to highway patrol.

The show of force was prodigious - police helicopters hovered overhead; land units road on horses and others in armored vehicles; canine units held snarling dogs at bay; black-clothed police squads stood poised with beanbag bullets; patrol boats cruised the waterside of the terminal, apparently staving off a possible union worker invasion by sea. "You would think there was going to be a terrorist attack on the state of South Carolina", Riley says.

As the saying goes: when you prepare for war, that's what you get. Some say a longshoreman made the first move, trampling a local cop's foot. Other say the cops pushed into the group of picketers first. Another version holds that a longshoreman had jumped the gun, but the local cops - who were holding the line against the protest - were doing just fine until a state officer further back ordered a second phalanx of cops to charge the picketers. Riley says that he stepped in the middle to calm the situation, and was clubbed on the head.

Whatever the spark, the fight was on - although, given the imbalance in numbers and fire-power, the fracas was fairly brief. All in all, a relatively minor footnote in the nation's history of bloody labor battles. Yet the morning after, a dispirited mood hung over the port city. Unlike the rest of South Carolina, labor had earned the respect of the Charleston establishment, which in the cutthroat dockside world knew the instrumental role organized longshoremen played in maintaining the port's prosperity. According to one observer, "both sides felt bad that it had come to this".

It was a testament to the understanding between the union and authorities that the local police decided against aggres-

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sively pursuing charges. Nine workers were arrested for trespassing - misdemeanor charges that were later dropped for lack of evidence.

But the Charleston longshoremen didn't bargain for the role that political ambition would play in determining their fate, said ambition being that of South Carolina's attorney general, Charlie Condon.

Condon had grown up in Charleston, and by his 20s was fast becoming a darling in Democratic Party circles. By the 1990s, sensing a shift in the political winds, he turned Republican. Condon's years as Attorney General have been distinguished by his ravenous appetite for media attention - including his publicity-grabbing, if legally questionable, law-and-order crusades, including those stripping the right of accused criminals to appeals, and most recently, campaigns to jail drug-addicted expecting mothers for "child abuse" against unborn fetuses. He may be the only state attorney general in the nation who has lost every case he has brought before the federal Supreme Court (three so far) on 9-0 decisions.

In the case of the Charleston longshoremen, Condon saw political gold. A crackdown on the ILA would not only bolster his law-and-order credentials, but make a similarly clear statement about the place of blacks and workers in Condon's South Carolina, where he announced his intention to run for governor this past March.

Such ambitions explain why, in February of last year, as Charleston authorities were quietly letting the cases against the dock workers slide, South Carolina television viewers were treated to an unusually strident piece of political propaganda. With George W. Bush and John McCain trading blows for the state's presidential primary, Condon broadcast a now-infamous campaign ad, endorsing G.W. Bush and promising "jail, jail and more jail" for the shipyard workers. What bearing the presidential race had on the Charleston labor battle wasn't mentioned, but the ultimate message was clear: a vote for Bush was a vote against the ILA.

Bush won South Carolina. And Condon soon set to work to make good on his political promise. The state quickly singled out what were to become the Charleston Five and served them with a laundry list of charges, including felony rioting, conspiracy to riot, two assault cases, and resisting arrest. The accused are currently under house arrest, which requires them to stay at home from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.; the felony riot charges alone carry up to five years of prison time.

As for Nordana, its joined with WSI, a stevedore company that supplies the non-union workers, to sue Local 1422 and their sister union, checkers and clerks Local 1771, for $1.5 million in alleged financial losses. But last April, the unions bargained with Nordana to establish a new "small boat agreement" which holds union wage levels, but which loosens union standards on hours and staffing levels. Upon reaching the agreement, Nordana dropped out of the civil suit and encouraged WSI to do the same - but WSI instead added 27 more picketers to the suit, which it is still pursuing.

The more the state presses, the more determined becomes the opposition, rooted in labor-community coalitions and far-reaching solidarity networks unique to Southern organizing. More and more national unions have pledged support, and a Swedish representative of the International Dockworkers Council has pledged that their organization would encourage shutting down ports across Europe if justice wasn't served.

Back on the Charleston waterfront, the port is still humming. The dockworkers of Local 1422, including the Charleston Five, are still at work, loading and unloading the fortunes of the global South. But the city is haunted by a new consciousness of labor's power to shape shipyard economics, by fear of what this power, tied to workers' struggles the world over, may spell for the future. Through the Charleston waterfront and the mind of the South, the ghost of Denmark Versey blows still. CP

Attorney general Condon promised "jail, jail and more jail" for the shipyard workers.

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The South's Red Hot Labor Battle

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OLS overmatter

ing us to crawl across irritable passengers and walk up and down the aisle.

Cheektowaga: The Latest

CounterPuncher Jack Bradigan Spula, a resident of Rochester NY, brings new fuel to the debate over what precisely is the essence of Cheektowaga, initially described here as an "awful, racist town where the late Tim McVeigh briefly worked as a warehouse guard in the early 1980s.

The main thing to remember about this region is not that people here are unusually racist. It's that our politics and municipal boundaries, the latter hardened by state law, show a distinctive form of apartheid which few care much to disturb. Whites here are still in full flight to almost monochromatic suburbs and "good schools". Yes, that happens all over. But there aren't many areas where de facto Jim Crow has survived so comfortably. (I lived in Houston for two years, and I can tell you that city, for all its Klan and Old South associations, is kinder to minorities than is our grand old Rust Belt.)

The problems here are rooted more deeply in slash-and-burn capitalism. Just from 1990-2000, the city of Buffalo — now bereft of steel and auto plants, rail, and Great Lakes shipping — lost more than 11 percent of its population, by official count. The city population now stands at 293,000; compare the historic high of 580,000 in 1950. The changes are mirrored in neighborhoods and infrastructure. Away from the rocking "Theater District" and other downtown attractions, many blacks, latinos, and working-class whites live in ramshackle neighborhoods; you can almost hear the bulldozers revving up. Meanwhile, the suburbs expand toward the horizon; wealthy Amherst takes pride in getting Money magazine's designation as "America's safest" town (easily decoded).

But back to Cheektowaga. One morning a few years ago, Cynthia Wiggins, a 17-year old black woman from the city of Buffalo, was trying to get to her job in a Cheektowaga shopping mall, right near the Borders which one CounterPunch reader mentioned. Wiggins never made it; a truck mowed her down just beyond the mall property line. Seems the mall owners (based in Syracuse, NY, by the way) didn't allow the "inner city" bus to stop on their hallowed ground. The policy changed after progressive Buffalonians raised hell. But local apartheid is still in fine working order.

Surfeit of Dentists

In the wake of Becky Grant's item on dental scams in our last issue, CounterPuncher John Farley adds this comment.

Dentists have succeeded in getting people to floss and brush their teeth, and much of the drinking water is now fluoridated. This reduces the "drill and fill" business of dentists. Thus they have partially put themselves out of business by their successful public health campaigns. In some parts of the country, dentists are in surplus supply. Dental schools have closed in some parts of the country. This puts dentists under pressure to perform unnecessary work to bring in the money.

My own dentist, in Las Vegas, tells me that he would love to move to California, but the field is too overcrowded there. He says that dentists in California are working as dental assistants. So getting a second opinion sounds like a good idea.

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